

Votyak folksongs

Connections of Votyak songs with religious life, the calendar and customs

The oldest layer of song-texts are connected with the ancient religious beliefs of Votyak ancestors. Among others, the chants traditionally sung on the occasion of the so-called *akaška* festival belong to this sphere. The word *akaška* (in its fuller form: *akajaška*) is of Chuvash origin, composed of Chuv. *aka* 'plough' and *jaška* 'soup'. According to AS-MARIN's dictionary, *aka jaški* means: a prayer and feast recited and held after spring sowing is finished. The Chuvash origin of the festivity cannot be doubted but among the Votyak the feast is celebrated before the spring sowing. MUNKÁCSI gives a detailed description of the festival along to lines of one of his informants, a native of the Mamadysh district of the one-time Kazan province (VotjNpk. 169–176). The introductory lines read as follows:

"*Akaška* is the greatest feast of the Votyaks. They celebrate it for seven days counted from the beginning of the Orthodox Easter, by resting (i.e. abstaining from work), playing and joking. On the first day they make preparations for the feast, brewing beer, distilling brandy, baking crackling cones (small unsweetened round cakes), girdle-cakes, and killing goats. In the afternoon, the lads and girls go to the meadow where they amuse themselves singing, dancing and sporting. In the evening they have the »walk«, when the young, unmarried men proceed from the lower end of the village to the upper, dropping in on every house playing the violin, singing and dancing ...".

MUNKÁCSI writes further about the food and drink sacrifice performed on the second day, and describes several other customs attaching to the festive ceremonies.

The *akaška* chants have been listed as Easter songs in our volume, because the time of the feast has coincided with the Russian Easter for the past hundred years.

In certain songs the festival is termed *jumša*.

There are many songs connected with Whitsuntide. The Votyak, Cheremis, Tartar and Chuvash folks finish sowing about that time. Among the Votyaks, "swinging" is a highlight of this feast. They have a song (123), dealing specially with the taking down of the swing.

This latter feast is celebrated also with regard to the departed ones. One of our songs (315) is habitually sung by old people in the graveyard in commemoration of the dead. The Cheremis, too, remember their dead at Whitsuntide. In both cases, ancient pagan rites have been blended with Christian rituals.

On the occasion of a more notable festivity, when a whole village or an even larger community participated in the event, the Votyaks used to sacrifice horses or bulls, though for family ceremonies smaller animals, geese or poultry would do as well. The bones of the sacrificed animal were buried, burning being prohibited. Tune No. 199 in this book preserves the memory of such ceremonies.

Mythical connotations are to be supposed in the case of songs referring to thawing, blossom-time, spring-time floods, and spring farewell. However, it is a common feature of

Votyak songs, as well as of Cheremis songs, that the words do not contain any direct reference to time, date or the occurrence of the natural phenomena they are connected with.

Among the Chuvash, one of the richest cycles of songs is connected with Shrovetide. A few Votyak songs (54, 64, 88, 309) are also performed during horse-racing and sleigh-racing at Shrovetide.

Closely related to the songs mentioned above are those sung at times of hay-making. These cannot be classified as work-songs. Hay-making among their Cheremis neighbours, too, counts as a feast when the youth dance and sing well into the night. Nor does the song performed at thread-washing appear to be a typical work-song that would help the progress of the work (94).

The most significant cycle is certainly that represented by the group of wedding-songs.

It is either a suitor or the father of the young man that asks for the would-be bride's hand in marriage. They do not speak plainly about their commission. ("Our cow has gone astray and the traces lead to this place.") The girl's parents pretend they are not willing to give away their daughter in marriage. They make various excuses: the girl is too young to marry, or the trousseau is not yet ready ("The bridal chest is empty"), and so on. If consent is given, they discuss the marriage in detail.

Special songs are attached to the various stages of the wedding. The bridegroom's relatives sing a song of their own when arriving at the place of the nuptials (190). The bride's party also have their own song (306), and so has the bride (273). But the parents on both sides sing strophes fit for the occasion (171).

To the nuptial dance performed in very simple figure of eight formations special songs are also sung in a quick, lively tempo. It is a quite typical feature of the dance-tunes that the stanzas are complemented by refrains consisting of playful, nonsense words (79, 81, 82).

The group of bridal-farewell songs performed by the participants of the wedding ceremony includes numerous tunes (143, 144, 149, 150, 152), and the bride also has her own song (70). The improvised bridal laments widespread among the Mordvin and Russian peoples are not customary among the Votyaks.

The reception, feasting and entertaining of guests take place according to particular rituals. Very many songs are connected with such ceremonies in both the Votyak and the surrounding ethnic groups, so much so that this tune-cycle might well be taken for a typical area phenomenon in the Volga-Kama region. There are songs to greet the coming guests (39, 114); other songs to pay honour to the assembled guests (279); others again when the various dishes are served (253). The old folks also have their own songs (280). It is only natural that the departing guests are seen out of the house with special farewell songs (284).

Another area phenomenon – even more typical perhaps than anything described before – may be seen in the habitual soldiers' farewell songs. Among the Votyaks, it is always the recruit that bids farewell in song when parting from his folk and leaving the place where he lives (21, 103, 122, 126).

Only a negligible portion of the songs presented in this book do not pertain to some sort of feast, custom, event, calendar day, or other occasion. The text-publications of MUNKÁCSI and WICHMANN contain many more songs unconnected with rites, rituals or ceremonies. They abound, first and foremost, in love-songs. Our informants were by far the most part, old – sometimes very old – people, since in general, the younger generation did not know the traditional local songs. Hence this evident difference between earlier collections and the present one.

The Votyak language

The Votyak (Udmurt) language, along with Zyrian (Komi), belongs to the so-called Permian branch of the Finno-Ugrian language family. The two languages even today, are closely related, having some eighty per cent of their vocabulary in common. In the field of morphology and syntax the agreement is still more apparent.

The influences of foreign languages, except Russian, on the vocabulary of Votyak have been discussed already in the chapter on Votyak history. A strong Russian influence has affected primarily northern Votyak, owing to almost five-hundred years of close contact. The number of early borrowings from Russian approximates to five hundred or so. In the course of the last fifty to sixty years, the Votyak vocabulary has been enriched mainly by Russian words, especially in the spheres of science, technical, and economic progress, state administration, etc. At the same time, the latent possibilities of their native tongue for expressing new concepts have to some extent been exploited. Words of Russian etymology are found to preponderate in some newspaper articles, while in novels dealing with rural life only three or four, sometimes even fewer, turn up for pages.

In Votyak – with few exceptions – the last syllable of each word is accented. Since, however, in Votyak the word-endings – unlike Finnish – have been strongly eroded; e.g. *Fi. vete* 'water' ~ Voty. *vu*; *Fi. poika* 'boy' ~ Voty. *pi*, etc., this accentuation must have been a recent development, otherwise no erosion of stressed syllables is to be surmised. In Tartar, the accent also falls on the last syllable, and Votyaks adopted this phonetic feature from the Tartars; earlier they certainly placed the accent on the first syllable.

In Finno-Ugrian linguistics, different opinions have been voiced in connection with the dialectal division of the Votyak language. Nevertheless, scholars of Votyak profess a fairly uniform view in that the most substantial difference is to be found between the northern and the southern dialect groups. Besides these, a so-called middle dialect is to be discerned, in which northern and southern features are combined. Further, the language of the Beserman ethnic group is regarded as being a special dialect. The Besermans live in the northern part of the Votyak-speaking area. According to the 1920 Russian census, they numbered 10 000 or so. In subsequent census takings they were not differentiated from the Votyak. Their ethnic name is a variant of the word *musulman*. (Cf. Hungarian *böszörmény*.) In all likelihood, the Besermans are Votyakized Bulgar-Turks.

The song-texts published in the present volume represent the diverse variants of the southern dialect. Essentially, the Votyaks that live in Bashkiria also belong here, since they originally emigrated from the southern dialect area.

The most typical phonetic features of these dialects developed under the impact of Tartar. In these dialects *č* and *ž* correspond to *č* and *ž* in literary Votyak, and *d'* to *j* rather frequently.

The phoneme *i* of the literary usage has been replaced by *ê* in most, though not all, parts. In our collection *ô* stands consistently for *ê* of the literary standard. Earlier collectors marked this phoneme by *ö*, *ä*, or *ë* symbols, which are misleading since the vowel *ô* is actually *o* formed in a somewhat more forward position.

In certain words, mostly Tartar, *a* is replaced by a labial *â* unknown in literary language.

The phonetic change $a > \bar{a}$ takes place, rarely, in Votyak dialects in Bashkiria, and the \bar{a} sound, unknown in other dialects also occurs, mainly in Tartar borrowings.

Another Tartar influence is that the Votyak *-jos* plural suffix in certain cases does not indicate a plural, but has an emphatic or possibly syllable-filling function.

The phonetic change $l > w$ is a southern Votyak dialect feature independent of Tartar influence, as also is the occurrence of \bar{u} (= Swedish u).

Depending on the singers' educational background, the impact of literary usage on certain performances could be felt, especially where they pronounced l instead of w and \bar{u} instead of u , as would be reasonably expected in dialect areas. Nevertheless, we have in each case given the words in the form in which they were actually sounded.

The first Votyak literary (written) records originate from the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The Votyak grammar published by V. PUTSEK-GRIGOROVICH in 1775 is the most important of them. From the very beginning, Votyak texts were presented in Cyrillic characters, and by the first years of the twentieth century the orthography used to date was already established in its main features. Phonemes alien to Russian were marked by modified Cyrillic letters. For example, \bar{a} stands for \bar{z} , \bar{z} for \bar{z} , and \bar{e} for \bar{o} .

Votyak texts published before 1917 bear the stamp of dialect features. It was the explicit aim of the Kazan Missionary Society that every Votyak group should be supplied with religious works written in the group's dialect.

Consonants

Place of formation	Mode	bilabial	labiodental	dental	alveolar	palatal	palatovelar
Plosives	mute	p		t		t'	k
	voiced	b		d		d'	g
Affricatives	mute				č	č'	
	voiced				ž	ž'	
Nasals		m		n		ñ	
Spirants	mute			s	š	ś	
	voiced		v	z	ž	ž'	j
Liquids	lateral			l		l'	
	tremulant				r		

The question of language integration arose only after the revolution. Discussions about whether the northern or the southern dialect should be taken as the basis of the uniform literary standard were held over a fifteen year period. Finally, in around the mid-thirties, agreement was reached: literary Votyak should be based on the transition-dialect, but certain lexical and grammatical elements might be borrowed from both the northern and the southern dialects.

Votyak phonetic structure

As in the two former volumes, here, too, we have noted down the Votyak texts by means of a simplified version of the phonetic symbols of the SETÄLÄ-system, generally accepted and used by Finno-Ugrian scholars.

The Votyak literary language has 33 phonemes (26 consonants and 7 vowels), which are tabulated as follows.

Palatalization in Votyak is independent of vowel context.

Only the more recently borrowed words have *r* as initials in Votyak. The original *r* initial was earlier replaced by *ž*, e.g. Zyr. *rok* 'mush' ~ Voty. *žuk*.

Vowels

<i>i</i>	<i>ĩ</i>	<i>u</i>
<i>e</i>	<i>ẽ</i>	<i>o</i>
	<i>a</i>	

Traces of vowel harmony are only found in the dialects of Votyak in Bashkiria, as a result of modern Tartar influence.

Characteristic features of the style and prosody of Votyak songs

Textually, the Votyak songs collected by us fall into stanzas of four lines. Not infrequently, however, the strophes have a different musical structure, composed of two sections only. (Cf. No. 9.) Similar features are to be found also in Chuvash songs. (Cf. VIKÁR and BERECKZI: *Chuvash Folksongs*, p. 84.)

As in Chuvash and Cheremis songs, it is typical that the two first lines of the structure of a Votyak stanza present a natural picture, which functions as an introduction emotionally to the succeeding two lines, that is, they expound the content of the natural symbol in relation to the singer's personal feelings. An example of this is No. 30 in the present book: The seeds of the sweet apple (I should like to hold in my hand.) The children I have brought up I should like to keep always in sight.

This kind of strophe-construction is typical of the folk-poetry of the Tartar, Chuvash, and many other peoples of Turkic origin. (Cf. VIKÁR and BERECKZI, *loc. cit.* p. 82.)

Beside the above feature, there are numerous other traits that relate Votyak songs, at least southern Votyak songs, to Tartar, Cheremis, and Chuvash folk-poetry.

The stylistic twist in the following stanza can also be found among the neighbouring nations: When stepping across the meadow gate / My whip was caught in. / It is not my whip that was caught in, / My mother stayed at home, weeping. (21).

A similar example may be cited from the Cheremis: The apron you have tied on / Is mullah Jusuf's prayer-book. / It is not mullah Jusuf's prayer-book, / It is my sister's embroidery. (Ö. BEKE: *Mari szövegek*. [Mari texts.] IV, 316.)

The Chuvash also have parallel constructions: The white apron has no fringes, / Neither fringes nor embroidery. / Our youth have no happiness, / It is not happiness they do not have, / But they have no happy days. (S. M. MAKSIMOV: *Chuvashskie narodnye pesni*. [Chuvash folksongs.] Moscow, 1964, 306.)

As to the verse patterns, the songs of the Votyaks resemble from many aspects those of the Chuvash and Cheremis. Among the rhyme-formulas, aaba, abab, aabb, abac are the most frequently employed. The rhymes are mainly, suffix-rhymes, but even these are often omitted. As regards syllable structures, couplets with a first line that differs by one or two syllables from the second, e.g. 11, 9, 11, 9; 7, 6, 7, 6; 10, 8, 10, 8 etc. are very typical. Strophic structures of this kind turn up in great abundance in Chuvash folksongs (cf. VIKÁR and BERECKZI, *loc. cit.* p. 87), and with an even greater frequency ratio in Tartar songs. Obviously, the Votyaks acquired these forms due to Chuvash and Tartar influence. But there are stanza-constructions which are much more irregular and recall, in all likelihood, an ancient practice of Votyak rhyme.